

“Implicit” contestations of EU foreign policy norm- domestication in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia

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This article focuses on scrutinizing EU’s norm-setting practices toward the Western Balkan (WB6) countries through identifying particular points of norm-acceleration and norm-resistance related to EU’ foreign policy and enlargement objectives in developing “good neighborly relations” (GNR) regionally. Although the EU has repeatedly attempted to diffuse its foreign policy and enlargement-related norms to promote regional stability, development and cooperative relations across the WB6 countries, we posit that two policies are not always complimentary and that domestication of these norms in some countries still remains nationally contextualized and guided by specific dynamics. This article explores the factors that promote or mitigate the domestication of EU-induced norms in two selected countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. By examining these two cases separately, we argue the current norm domestication patterns in both countries stave off these “coded” EU-induced normative perspectives on GNR, mainly because of their strong mixture with the “non-codified” enlargement criteria.

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Introduction

Nowhere is the power of the European Union (EU), as an actor standing independently and above its member states felt more powerfully than in the Western Balkans (WB) (cf. Ker-Lindsey, Armakolas, Balfour, & Stratoulat, 2017; Noutcheva, 2009; Pavličević, 2019). The EU has shown long-lasting and strong commitments at the highest levels to establish its presence in the WB, initially in conflict resolution and over time as an active state-builder across the region (Keil & Arkan, 2015). More recently, the high-level political dialogue between the EU and the WB countries is designed to enhance the regional stability and security, mainly through neutralizing all emerging crises and tensions, reconciling and resolving open issues regionally, as well as developing comprehensive and coordinated approaches towards addressing the potential security challenges (Hasić & Dedić, 2019).

Whereas the Western Balkans democracies and states were being built from above, with the EU as both an actor and a goal (cf. Schimmelfenning & Sedelmeier, 2020), the evolution of the EU's normative power has lately straddled in two distinct dimensions. The EU pursues its goals in the WB through both foreign policy and enlargement prisms: preserving stability and peace, as well as developing and consolidating democracies in the WB countries, as a cornerstone of its foreign policy objectives in the region (Amadio Vicere, 2016; Čepo, 2019), and ensuring that the WB countries' integration through accepting a full range of EU regulations and norms, remains as one of the cornerstones of its regional enlargement policy (cf. Belloni, 2009; Freyburg & Richter, 2010; Hasić & Vit, 2020; Noutcheva, 2012; O'Brennan, 2014).

The overall image that emerges from the existing literature appears to be one-dimensional: the two policies are distinct and run in parallel, but remain somewhat complementary. We argue that ensuring objectives of one does not always feed into the objectives of another, and this is why the current norm domestication of certain norms in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia cannot gain a foothold. The existing normative schemes embedded in the two specific political systems of the two countries stave off the "implicit" EU-centric foreign political normative regional perspectives on "good neighborly relations" (GNR), simply because of their strong normative convergence with the "non-codified" EU enlargement criteria. That marginalizes local agencies and disrupts the diffusion of these norms in both regional and national contexts.

The specific purpose of this article is to identify and differentiate the factors that enable or constrain the domestication of EU-induced norms in two selected WB countries, ethnically and politically volatile Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, as well as to identify the contestations and limitations of current norm-diffusion patterns. The research is guided by the following question: How does the articulation of the "good neighborly relations" norm affect its reception and domestication by local elites in BiH and North Macedonia and what are the effects of norm's (non-)adaptation in the context of developing further relations with the EU?

This article adds to the academic conversation on international norm diffusion and domestication by focusing on the understudied aspect of local agency in accepting and reproducing the enacted normative models, thus contributing to ontological consistency in examining the role of local agents, their actions and understandings in formulating accounts of international relations (cf. Bucher, 2014). Simultaneously, it also contributes to the overall understanding of contestation of the EU foreign policy, and EU as the most engaged normative actor in the WB. Examining the confluence of intentions, models, patterns, causes, processes, and consequences of the existing EU norm entrepreneurship will help us in understanding whether EU's foreign policy and enlargement orientations toward regional norm-setting and domestication are locally understood as competitive or compatible, and whether relevant elite discourses appropriately reflect these prospects.

Conceptual framework and positioning within the literature

The study of concepts connected to relational power and the soft power of ideas, values, and norms (cf. Bernstein, 2000; Bjorkdahl, 2002) have gradually found their ways into the EU studies (cf. Dimitrova & Rhinard, 2005; Elgstrom, 2000; Flockhart, 2010; Merlingen, Mudde, & Sedelmeier, 2001; Pace, 2007; Whitman, 2011) and into literature on the EU and the Western Balkans relations (cf. Anastasakis, 2008; Bechev, 2006; Hasić & Dedić, 2019; Noutcheva, 2009).

Norms are used to express values that create rights and establish standards of "appropriate behavior", without specifically identifying what the actual behaviour is but rather creating a conception of what appropriate behaviour ought to be (Bernstein, 2000). The definition of norms in sociological studies enables both analysis of a norm itself and its contestation (Kostovicova & Biquelet, 2018; Wiener, 2018). In general, all norms emerge and have origins, they are diffused, domesticated and localized (settled), have intrinsic qualities and are socially embedded in specific power relations. Models and patterns of norm diffusion and domestication are not universal and they are subjectively applied in various contexts, for a variety of problems (Gilardi, 2012). Constructivist approaches in understanding the dynamics of norm diffusion and domestication have habitually considered norms as "objects",

paying very limited attention to “processes” that shape a norm’s emergence and its spread (Epstein, 2008). However, the presence of certain power imbalances or the strength of fully localized norms persisting in “non-Western” societies prior to the introduction of “new” internationally driven norms may create some tensions and contestations, carried out by either active or passive norm-antagonists and exogenous rival networks or actors (Adachi, 2013), or networks of rivals acting as an endogenous part of the examined society (Bob, 2012).

There are at least three distinct levels where norms can operate: transnational, international, and domestic. On a transnational level, norms circulate among non-governmental actors across national boundaries, at the international level norms travel among a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, and at a domestic level (for instance, within institutions, party system, other social spheres etc.), for “social construction of reality” that shapes state identity and interests (Keohane, 2010). Success in domestication and localization depends on the insider proponents being seen as upholders of local values and identity (Acharya, 2004). The role of domestic structures and organizational and political variables in conditioning the domestic reception of global norms and in conditioning the reception of new global norms is crucial, as it also reflects domestic agency in resisting and contesting the process of norm domestication (Adachi, 2013; Bloomfield & Scott, 2014; Cortell & Davis, 2000).

When diffusing and domesticating norms within local settings in BiH and North Macedonia, and at the same time respecting the local contexts, signifying a “cultural match” (cf. Checkel, 1999), and recognizing the norm-setting legitimacy (Birdsall, 2016), we observe it is important to also take into account regional interactions and their importance in shaping the mezzo-level between domestic and regional/international/transnational levels. We focus on examining the points of resistance and contestation in the spread of EU foreign policy norms in non-EU domestic polities, and elaborating how these norms are diffused and domesticated in non-EU contexts.

We argue that EU foreign policy orientation toward the WB, though constructed as a top-down monolithic bulk-discourse on “good neighbourly relations” with a unified set of overall regional goals to be attained, has diversified over time into dynamic foreign policy normative substructures. We posit the EU foreign policy agents are actively using their foreign policy normative pressure in advancing neighbouring relations in the WB and systematically pairing it with other non-codified norms, for instance the embargo on importing “bilateral disputes” into the EU and into the accession negotiations, which traditionally belongs to the EU enlargement portfolio. The good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation also constitute part of the EU foreign policy alignment chapter for the WB countries. Such “mergers” create inconsistencies in EU norms, put extra pressure and dependency on local agents, and reduce them to norm “gatekeeping” before full settlement in the society. In this context, we attempt to bridge the divide between “the international and the domestic” dimensions by combining the internally constructed identities of examined states embedded in their internationally driven social identities into a framed normative structure (cf. Bjorkdahl, 2002) to specify the conditions under which specific norms operate and influence “outward oriented intergrational policies” (cf. Garcha, 2007; Risse-Kappen, 1994).

Since the essence of actors’ agency in norm diffusion within a domestic society is primarily reliant on the roles of the international counterparts, we also aim to locate the agency role of norm-takers through a dynamic congruence-building process called “localization”, more explicitly on how transnational norms produce institutional change that adapts to the outside structures (Acharya, 2004, p. 240). We are interested in exploring whether contestation of such an externally driven (i.e. EU-induced) norm is at odds with the local understanding of the entire process, within the perceived power imbalances. We do not claim that implicit or explicit contestation of such EU-induced norms by locals is necessarily directed at their meaning or quality, but rather at the way they are intended to be domesticated, i.e. implemented locally, and modalities in which their effects can be potentially postponed.

Methods

To facilitate the examination of the research aims, we examine different national political environments and analyse to what extent these mattered in contesting the EU-norm of good neighbourly relations. We utilize process

tracing (George & Bennet, 2005; Vasilev, 2011) in an effort to tease out details of the empirical cases of BiH and N. Macedonia. We focus on framing shaped and implemented by official institutions and elected officials, since the legal enforcement of Stabilization and Association Agreements in BiH and N. Macedonia, respectively. By inspecting primary sources that meticulously illustrate the developments of the past turbulent decade, we are able to triangulate, sequence, and contextualize the specific points of norm contestation. This is further supplemented by a secondary review of academic literature directly related to the subject matter. We aim for providing general frameworks and narratives rather than detailed tracing of the causal sequences (cf. Falletti & Lynch, 2009).

We independently focus on case studies of multiethnic and multifaceted powersharing political systems of Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. Although both countries started their accession to the EU simultaneously in 2003, the pace of the accession turned out differently. BiH is currently in the pre-negotiation state, as a potential candidate for EU accession since 2003, while North Macedonia has a fairly long-established candidate status since 2005 and is about to initiate the accession negotiations. The EU's focus in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and in North Macedonia was on producing normative policy outcomes and to generate normative procedures that comply with the EU standards. The EU's approach has been additionally reinforced by a Credible Enlargement perspective for and enhanced the EU's engagement with the WB. Such firm, merit-based prospect of is in the Union's very own political, security and economic interest, as geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe is based on common values (cf. Communication from the Commission, 2018).

Previous findings indicate that ethnic leaders in North Macedonia conformed to policy and normative changes proposed by the EU as a means to enhance security and identity concerns, whereas leaders in BiH resisted normative directives and failed to cooperate along ethnic lines because they perceived membership as standing in the way of aspirations for collective autonomy (cf. Vasilev, 2011). While both the EU's Stabilization and Association Process (i.e. enlargement tools) and Common Foreign and Security Policy (i.e. foreign policy tools) in BiH and North Macedonia were applied in synergy, over a long period of time, the process of adoption and application of specific EU rules and norms in both countries has effectively been postponed and somewhat hindered, thus opening the space for local stakeholders to become reluctant in substantive engagement in normative transformations, until these are paired with or incentivized by other factors and processes. Our goal is to highlight the EU's approaches in diffusing the norms on "good neighborly relations" in the two countries and the need for continued cooperation on resolving regional and bilateral disputes. We aim to uncover two countries' individual responses, preferences, and interests to contest this "combined" approach and address it locally in specific and tailored manners.

Promoting the "good neighborly relations" norm in the Western Balkans

Back in December 2000, the Council of the European Union passed the 2666/2000 Regulation ensuring the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization Program in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic (FYR) of Macedonia, and Serbia and Montenegro. This goal is further specified and clearly defined in the Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAA) between the EU and each of the WB countries. At the Regional Conference for South Eastern Europe (2001) the European Commission (EC) asked of countries of the region to establish a "network of close contractual relations among themselves", one that would remove trade barriers, tackle common threats, and mirror the bilateral relationship with the EU contained in Stabilization and Association Agreements. At the June 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, the EU member states confirmed their interest to accept the WB countries as soon as they fulfil all set conditions (Čepo, 2019). The so-called Thessaloniki agenda included a wide range of initiatives to support those countries in their preparations for (potential) EU membership in the future (Van Elsuwege & Van der Loo, 2017).

Ever since, the European Union has actively pursued the development of special relationships with the WB countries, primarily in promoting stability, security, democracy and fundamental freedoms in the WB, which are firmly anchored in the enlargement process (Exchange of Views on Albania and Kosovo, on 7 July 2010). The EU's presence in the Western Balkans has never been only about transforming the states aspiring to become the EU

members, but also about addressing regional issues that still threatened peace and stability. The EU offered an integration perspective with the aim of ultimately stabilizing the volatile region and combining the externally driven state-building with access to membership (Keil & Arkan, 2015).

In spite of some major successes, the EU has repeatedly shown a slight discourse dissonance in the WB, by issuing weak and often-declaratory policies combined with slow-evolving initiatives aimed at producing long-lasting results (for example EU Connectivity Agenda). Over the years, the goals focused on establishing “peace, democracy, and prosperity” (EC Report, 8 May 2014), “transformation and anchor stability” (EC Report, 9 November 2016), as well as creating connections “digitally, legally, physically, and politically” (EC Report, 25 June 2018).

The close conjunction of the EU’s enlargement and foreign political engagement in preserving peace and stability in the Western Balkans was further secured in the Stability and Association Process (SAP) (Keil, 2013). The SAP introduced Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs) as the main tool for driving the regional cooperation standards, and for advancing EU’s contractual relations with the WB countries. By adding a new “Title III” section to the agreements, the EU has completely merged the association process with the foreign political stabilization dimension. As such, “good neighborly relations” have become a pre-condition for the WB states that aspire to become EU members. Consequently, the EU itself has put a considerable emphasis on the matter and thus developed significant opening and interim benchmarks, as well as a broad range of various sanctions and measures that include suspension of the implementation of SAA (Vučković & Đorđević, 2019).

Bosnia and Herzegovina: pushing for a stronger re-engagement?

The EU’s engagement in the post-war reconciliation in the WB region illustrates its normative evaluation (cf. Schimmelfenning & Sedelmeier, 2020), while EU’s continuous presence in BiH reflects its active commitment in developing internal consolidation and branding of certain values and norms, mainly through building a shared vision and a prospect of future membership among all citizens of BiH and promoting its foreign political agenda and its pre-accession (enlargement) agenda (Hasić, 2020). In practice, most of the actions complement and reinforce the two political trajectories, which however does not always effectively service the promotion of the regional “good neighborly relations”. The EU-BiH relations and EU’s structural impact on the development of GNR are both determined by several factors: EU integration being inherently connected to regional integration trends, and as such indistinguishable between individual and regional foreign policy approach of the EU (Džananović, 2020; Grillot, Cruise, & D’Erman, 2010).

Establishing and maintaining the GNR with other WB countries for BiH is not only an obligation established by the SAA, but also one of its “geostrategic” foreign political objectives (cf. Hasić & Karabegović, 2019), since BiH is the only former Yugoslav republic that shares borders only with other ex-Yugoslav republics – i.e. Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro.

While BiH often resorts to multilateral agreements or the assistance of the international community, bilateral relations with Montenegro illustrate the GNR type the EU wants to see and maintain in the region. Political and economic relations between two countries have been developing steadily since 2006. Despite the somewhat heated debate in BiH about Sutorina, once part of the Bosnian seacoast, now located in Montenegro, the two countries have managed to sign an Agreement on Borders in 2015. The highest officials have exchanged visits on a regular basis and intensified institutional cooperation especially in the field of European integration. The two countries have a practice of regular consultations about taking common stands and joint actions within other regional and international bodies. This is illustrated by the conclusion of 21 legal bilateral agreements, protocols and memoranda on cooperation (Marković & Subašić, 2019).

Unlike with Montenegro, the relations with two other neighbouring countries, Croatia and Serbia,¹ are much more complex and ambiguous, mainly due to their role in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, unsettled issues stemming from Yugoslavia’s dissolution, diverging interpretations of the rulings of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), and respective “kinship” statuses.² Despite that, BiH also managed to increase the level

of bilateral cooperation with both Croatia and Serbia in the past decade, to resolve some of the remaining disputes, but only with qualified success.

BiH and Serbia have developed intensive multilevel and multi-sectorial relations and a practice of consultations and cooperation in different multilateral fora, mostly driven by EU-incentivized initiatives and projects. The steady rise of bilateral ties and cooperation between BiH and Serbia was noted since 2000. Ever since, the national level governing bodies held several joint sessions and signed a total of 51 bilateral agreements, protocol and memoranda. The crescendo in bilateral relations has been somewhat overshadowed by the apparent intensification of relations between the BiH entity Republika Srpska and Serbia,³ marked with a number of arrangements and agreements in different fields of cooperation.

Developments of good neighbourly relations between Croatia and BiH have also been portrayed as intense and complex, both in politics and other spheres of cooperation. While Croatia has been the most important foreign trade partner for BiH, this success has not stopped the two sides from engaging in various trade and border disputes. A number of bilateral agreements in different fields of cooperation were signed, and the two countries developed an impulse for collaboration in a number of regional and international organizations. Croatia extended strong political support for the Bosnian accession to the EU, and made sure its own positive practices from its EU integration process were transferred to BiH.⁴ However, as BiH was not well prepared for the Croatian EU membership in 2013, since the unresolved matters with Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA), trade concessions, property ownership, and border issues remained pertinent to the development of new and maintenance of the existing ties.

Since the European Commission framed the SAP on the accession framework, which entailed conditionality founded upon the Copenhagen membership criteria, some specific conditions in maintaining “good regional relations” were evident in the approaches the EU has taken toward BiH. Since BiH has not yet reached the candidate membership status and is currently far from starting the EU accession negotiations, the non-compliance with SAA cannot be directly sanctioned. In that respect, the EU’s foreign political involvement in creating stable reform prerequisites, vapidly mixed with enlargement strategy founded on “conditionality”, poses a genuine threat to the established legal system and political practice in BiH. However, several “soft” EU- driven initiatives have also enabled BiH to join and play an important role in a number of overlapping regional organizations, such as the Central European Initiative (CEI), the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (All), the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECPP), the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), and others. Membership and active participation in the work of these organizations at various levels has significantly contributed to the recent post-conflict normalization of relations between the former Yugoslav republics (Džananović, 2019).

Insisting on a resolution of all bilateral issues at this stage of the pre-accession process was seen by locals as a well-developed mechanism and a diplomatic pretexts for keeping the countries interested in the reform process, but not so invested in pursuing other forms of deeper involvement, until the enlargement paradigm within the EU drastically changes. The local political elites in BiH have developed and successfully domesticated a notion that the EU is actively using a “regional cooperation advancement” scheme, mainly driven by regional “multilateralization”, as a stalling strategy to dissuade local government to push for further EU integration steps until all other, seemingly less relevant issues, are resolved. In this way, the local elites absorb, reformulate, and actively resist the domestication of EU’s intentions for normative change to stabilize regional relations through promotion of GNR as its enlargement policy strategy, before they engage in meaningful foreign political relationships with BiH.

It should be noted that political and administrative adoption costs are generally higher for current candidates than in, for instance the previous CEE cases, and state capture has become more entrenched than in the previous accession rounds (Schimmelfenning & Sedelmeier, 2020). This is why local elites reminisce about the time when EU’s pre- Lisbon enlargement approach was less challenging, and that the current membership criteria are more dynamic and filled with many “non-codified” principles, which seem unrealistic and unattainable. In that sense, maintenance and promotion of GNR for BiH political elites heavily relies on the norm reception by other regional actors in the region and their respective actions. BiH’s compliance with the proposed transformative outcomes, in

most cases, comes as either imitation or following others, but not from the norm quality itself. The norm as such, is usually bypassed, ignored or contested. BiH political elites have previously developed a pattern of utilizing push-back strategies that diminish the overall impact of the externally driven initiatives in the long-term and which dishearten further political mobilization from below (cf. Hasić & Karabegović, 2018).

The local perceptions of the EU's reduced external integration capacity in preparing non-members for membership mixed with the absence of a viable membership perspective in the foreseeable period of time (cf. Borzel, Schimmelfenning, & Dimitrova, 2017) additionally reduces the normative value and domestication capacities of the intended transformative reforms in BiH. The current patterns of diffusion of EU-induced norms in BiH, such as GNR are still treated as a form of "disruption". They become increasingly controversial and spur debates about the practicality of policy reforms that could lead to elimination of previously "settled norms" that allow more space for various political manoeuvres. Perception of disruptiveness is one of the key reasons why EU norms do not gain a foothold. As a result, slow-changing local institutions are not able to adapt to fast-pacing norm diffusion processes, and this is also the reason why domestication of the EU's norm in BiH remains weak and inconsistent (Hasić & Dedić, 2019). In this way, BiH decision-makers implicitly contest the EU's foreign political and enlargement-related logic of appropriateness in transnational socialization, and opt for societally receptive imitation of the norms once and if they have been successfully tested and probed elsewhere. As a result, whenever EU-initiated regional cooperation is tabled, BiH opts for minor normative changes rather than significant reforms, even though they have and could potentially further benefit from EU's financial assistance as a reward. Overall, elites' claims about their determination to regional cooperation, and by extension the EU accession, could be interpreted as a marketing tool rather than a genuine intention, often illustrating that it is actually the EU who is more concerned about the Western Balkans' European perspective, and not the region itself (cf. Radeljić & Đorđević, 2020). In other words, they engage in "applicatory contestation" of the said norm (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2020).

This means the norm itself is only agreed upon through establishment of factually based perceptions that it brings potential benefits, but the substantive and applicative engagement with it is diminished and postponed due to the lack of concrete evidence and appropriate positionality of BiH in the process to reap just the right amount of political gains in order to abandon to current status quo.

North Macedonia: from estrangement to recognition of (mutual) benefits

Although North Macedonia was one of the regional frontrunners in European integration in the early and mid-2000s, at present it is considered among the regional laggards. Largely due to the repeated Greek vetoes in the European Council, N. Macedonia lost a decade in pursuing fundamental progress in European integration, a period during which the pace of reforms stalled and in some cases even reversed (Koneska, 2019). The Greek embargo and imposed isolationism, rivalry with other neighbouring countries, and a large influx of refugees passing through the country on their way to the EU, made the overall political situation even more complex (Ramić Mesihović, 2018). Rhetorical action by the EU has continuously been strong with respect to North Macedonia and other countries in the past 15 years, initially by invoking both preservation of security and the need for democratization as a part of the EU's normative basis (Koinova, 2011), and more recently by promoting the importance of civil society, democratic governance, and the responsibility of the government to include civil society in domestic decision-making (Hristova & Cekik, 2015).

Despite the fact that North Macedonia has not been geopolitically and strategically significant to its neighbours, all of them have been heavily involved in contesting parts of its sovereignty. Greece spent most of the last decade of the twentieth century primarily focusing its foreign policy actions on the dispute over identity symbols (i.e. toponyms and ethnonyms of the word "Macedonia") (Kalampalikis, 2020). As a result, North Macedonia's membership in international organizations depended heavily on a final agreement with Greece⁵ (Nimetz, 2020).

During the period of the dispute, both sides have attempted to implicate and utilize the EU for their own goals, and the EU itself has also managed to gain an important influence in the process (Mavromatidis, 2010). In the peak

of diplomatic confrontation (between 1991–1994 and 2006–2011),⁶ North Macedonia was not recognized by Athens, did not accede to NATO and failed to get a start date on the EU accession negotiations (Tziampiris, 2012).

There are several reasons for the stalling of EU-required reforms over the bilateral dispute with Greece. First, the “carrot” for completing reforms was removed, since successful completion of the EU requirements and reforms had not been rewarded with opening or closing negotiating chapters, or with starting accession talks. This undermined the whole logic of conditionality and threatened to undermine pro-EU impetus in the North Macedonia.⁷ If rewards were not available, then the government was less likely to pursue domestic reforms required for the EU membership (Basheska & Kochenov, 2015; Koneska, 2014), which effectively means that effects of EU driven normative power depletes (Borzel & Schimmelfenning, 2017). Second, the repeated Greek vetoes in the EU had an adverse impact on the public’s willingness to go through the painful reforms, as well as their overall support for EU membership. Among the Macedonian population, Greece’s actions in the EU were widely perceived as unfair and “non-European”, as they do not appear to conform to the values of “good neighborly relations” (Koneska, 2019). Since the opening of the EU accession negotiations was considered as one of the primary objectives of North Macedonia’s foreign policy, it has served as a powerful incentive for the national government to invest considerable knowledge and diplomatic craft, as well as time and energy in resolving the dispute with Greece, despite the delays and time lost.

This dispute has finally been resolved with implementation of the Prespa Agreement⁸ that was warmly welcomed by, among others, the EU, the UN, NATO and the USA. The official version of the Prespa process was premised on the game theory notion that it would produce a “win-win” situation (Vankovska, 2020) and a due diligence obligation that falls upon both parties to continuously request the proper employment of the name arrangement *erga omnes* (Pergantis, 2019). The two Prime Minister’s spearheading the conclusion of the Prespa Agreement faced political and social tensions in their respective countries. Greek PM Tsipras survived the parliamentary confidence vote, but lost the 2019 parliamentary elections, while North Macedonia’s PM Zaev barely “survived” the July 2020 general elections. The pace of reception and domestication of EU-induced norms on resolving bilateral disputes, concealed as a prospect for opening further opportunities in regional cooperation and developing GNR, indicates ambivalence in the approach used. The EU’s involvement was indirect, but was somehow intrinsically merged in the process, mainly by moderating antagonistic outbursts and nationalist impulses in both domestic and foreign policies.

Post-Prespa social, political, economic, and security conditions in North Macedonia called for an overall reconstruction of the Macedonian society under increasingly tense and difficult circumstances. Internal problems between radicals and moderates, nationalists and those opposing them, ethnic Macedonians and Albanians, reflected severely on pace of transformation of the state and society and on its goals, potentials and, consequently, formulation of the Macedonian foreign policy. Regional problems were less tangible, since throughout the period, the two key foreign policy goals of North Macedonia remained constant: European integration,⁹ evolving through the implementation of the SAP,¹⁰ and NATO membership. Both required uninterrupted and effective development of good neighbourly relations. North Macedonia became a member of NATO Headquarters¹¹ in March 2020, after 12 years of name-dispute blockages. In March of 2020, long overdue,¹² the Council of the EU has also decided to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania (cf. Enlargement and Stabilization, 2020).

With the change of government in 2017, which responded positively to EU incentives and looking to resolve the dispute with the EU member state Macedonian outlook on regional cooperation has significantly altered, and this is the area where most substantial progress has been achieved so far. As a result, the EC has regularly evaluated Macedonia’s progress in this area as “good¹³”, while both at popular and political level, regional cooperation was seen as good in itself, not only as a means of progress toward EU membership. This indicates that the GNR norm has been adopted and internalized.

The EU’s normative influence in promoting GNR in the Macedonian context showed to be most efficient when domestic and EU preferences did not diverge. It was also evident that the weakness of domestic institutions and the unstable commitment of political elites to implement EU-induced reforms made the overall transfer of EU

norms more complex in the short period of time (Koneska, 2019). In the case of North Macedonia, the EU's foreign policy clearly indicated how conflict prevention and the overall stability in the region was overshadowed by its own normative role in promoting democratization and GNR, as illustrated by Przino Agreement.¹⁴ The EU's prioritization of regional democratic consolidation over internal stability also shows that progress on the EU accession path is not always a result of democratic gains, but sometimes a byproduct of resolving bilateral disputes and meeting EU criteria on other matters (Gafuri & Muftuler-Bac, 2020). This is why the contestations of EU's foreign political engagement in diffusing GNR norm in North Macedonia could be characterized as a two-level "horizontal contestation", over the EU's role in managing the disputes between different national elites at the regional level, and over the EU's role in assessing and determining the priorities in setting the normative agenda that has repercussions on internal institutional stability and democratization (cf. Koenig, 2016).

Discussion and conclusions

The EU's foreign policy and enlargement portfolios toward WB6 have become gradually entangled in the past two decades. The EU's highest-level leaders have sought to balance this relationship and embed it regionally through promoting various norms that would effectively reflect carefully guided policies aimed at breaking the current ethnically occupied and managed polycentrism in the WB.

Previous EU engagement in the region through CFSP, diplomatic efforts, peacekeeping and peace- and state-building did not yield promising results. By combining the most viable features of its foreign political agenda and its enlargement scheme toward the WB6, the EU's (un)intentional goal was to diffuse a norm labelled as "good neighborly relations", with the aims of enhancing and stabilizing the regional cooperation before accession and full membership become a viable option. While this norm was rooted in the foreign policy agenda, much of its practical diffusion in the WB was managed under the SAP, which was a traditional part of the enlargement scheme. The EU has effectively merged the conditionality and membership perspectives, as rare and desired commodities, into the foreign policy normative structure it intended to diffuse across the region. In this sense, the EU's enlargement policy pursued in the Western Balkans has become the only real and measurable foreign policy objective, the EU was able to engage in.

Domestication of this mixed normative portfolio has been somewhat challenging locally. Even though each of the WB6 countries experienced the same top-down approach, the existing power imbalances, diverging historical circumstances, and intense regional relations made the situation more complex to handle over a short period of time. Our findings support the findings of an evolving body of literature focusing the EU's normative engagement in non-EU countries, aimed at stimulating regional cooperation and adjusting structural changes in the Western Balkan countries.

We argued that strategically and uniformly top-down diffusion of EU-induced norms on "good neighborly relations" in the WB region do not gain equal horizontal settlement across states. The norm's domestication is different within deviating national contexts, shaped by states' political identities, and with specific internal and external political dynamics. Ensuring the primary objective of domestication does not inevitably feed into other policy areas of interest and does not always facilitate the complementary EU foreign policy objectives.

Cases of BiH and North Macedonia illustrate that local decision-making elites opt for contestation of the norm's full-domestication, principally due to the lack of immediate and advantageous incentives. The "applicatory contestation" noted in the BiH case is characterized by intense postponement and implementation-related deferrals, which comprise the overall reforms and other aspects of societal transformation in domestic, regional, and international levels. The two-level "horizontal contestation" observed in the Macedonian case illustrates that domestication of the EU-induced norms suffers from diminished legitimacy, when the norm, as a meaning-in-use, is lost between two sets of competing and well-entrenched frameworks of reasoning.

Notes

1. The three countries are the signatories of the Dayton Peace Accords from 1995 that ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and established the complex constitutional framework for BiH.
2. BiH is one of the few European countries that still does not recognize Kosovo's independence due to the Republika Srpska's alignment with the official Belgrade's policies.
3. The Agreement on Establishing Special Parallel Relations between Republika Srpska and the Republic of Serbia signed in 2007. Available in local languages: <https://www.narodnaskupstinars.net/?q=la/akti/usvojeni-zakoni/zakon-o-ratifikaciji-sporazuma-o-uspo-stavljanju-specijalnih-paralelnih-odnosa>.
4. A complete translation of the EU acquis into Croatian was given to the BiH national authorities in 2010, which was invaluable as Croatian is one of the three official languages in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
5. Even though the article 24 (3) of the Treaty of the EU (TEU) outlines that the EU member states also support the Union's external and security policy actively and openly, in a spirit of loyalty and mutual solidarity, the Greek position toward the name dispute had normatively challenged this principle. In 2009, the name issue became one of the major stumbling blocks on Macedonia's EU membership path, because of the intervention of Athens officials (Vangeli, 2011).
6. An Interim Accord between Greece and Macedonia was signed in 1995, whereby, among others, Greece shall not hinder Macedonian integration processes on the basis of the international agreement. Due to violation of this agreement by Greece, Macedonia was prompted to file a complaint before the ICJ. The ICJ's decision may have a positive impact on Macedonia's membership in International Organizations such as: NATO and EU. For more details, please see Shterbani (2018).
7. Article on Zaev's resignation: <https://www.politico.eu/article/north-macedonian-pm-zoran-zaev-resigns/>.
8. This agreement was complemented by the "Friendship Treaty" with Bulgaria, titled: Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighbourliness, and Cooperation between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria, signed in Skopje, on 1 August 2017.
9. Since 2005, the country has the candidate status in the process and has maintained presence of the EU Delegation and the EU Special Representative.
10. European Commission, URL: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/sap_en, accessed on 6 July 2020.
11. NATO Official webpage, URL https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_174648.htm, accessed on 7 July 2020.
12. North Macedonia is still an EU candidate state, because the EU was unable to put forth credible commitment for membership due to member state vetoes, and due to prioritizing stability over membership perspective. For instance, France, the Netherlands and Denmark have blocked the start of membership talks at the EU Summit of leaders of May 2019 in spite of the advancements and reform progress made by North Macedonia and Albania's governments. For more details, please see Gafuri and Muftuler-Bac (2020).
13. EC reports: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/former-yugoslav-republic-macedonia/1457/former-yugoslav-republic-macedonia-and-eu_en.
14. Przino Agreement is an agreement between two main political parties, which ended institutional crisis in the country mid-2015. Text of the agreement is available here: <http://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/celosniot-dogovor-shto-utrovo-go-potpishaa-makedon-skite-lideri>.

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